

# The photographic eye: the camera in recent Australian fiction

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## Introduction

In recent years there has been a spate of Australian novels dealing with tropes derived from photography. These novels include Gerald Murnane's *The Plains* (1982), Liam Davison's *Soundings* (1993), Christopher Koch's *Highways to a War* (1995), Robert Drewe's *The Drowner* (1996), Delia Falconer's *The Service of Clouds* (1997), Kate Grenville's *The Idea of Perfection* (1999), James Bradley's *The Deep Field* (1999), Simone Lazaroo's *The Australian Fiance* (2000), and Candida Baker's *The Hidden* (2000). Each of these novels features a character who is a cameraman or woman, sometimes professional, sometimes amateur, but to whom the world is framed, filtered and focussed through the lens, the viewfinder, and the zoom.

In trying to understand the genesis and the importance of this photographic imagery, it is useful to consider Rodney Hall's Yandilli novels (*Captivity Captive* (1988), *The Second Bridegroom* (1991), *The Grisly Wife* (1993), and *The Day We Had Hitler Home* (2000)). The Yandilli novels, which span the period from early colonial times until the 1930s, feature a succession of magnifying lens, spectacles, daguerreotypes, engraving machines, fixed lens cameras, and finally a movie camera, which help settlers to possess and record their surroundings. The acquisitive gaze is revealed as a principal means by which space was brought within the realm of the discovered and mensuration and appropriation commenced.

Being a conscientious post-colonialist, however, Hall uses the Yandilli novels to challenge the notion that space can be acquired simply by possessing it visually. Throughout the novels he suggests that although these aids to seeing and recording the land might produce an improved view of distant landscapes, or a fixed image of carefully framed vistas, they do so without adding to the settler's capacity to comprehend the true nature of the land.

Recent scholarship has also emphasised the importance of visual acquisitiveness in the process of imperial expansion. Simon Ryan has written about 'exploration methodology's heavy reliance on sight' (87) and Paul Carter has noted that fixing visual images of the land 'was not only a means of recording space but of manipulating it. Scaling down horizons to the width of a page, it enabled one to model reality, to plan invasions' (28).

These examinations of the colonial need to fix images of the land have focussed on the cartographic representation of space. The map was the chief aid settlers had at their disposal when planning their invasions; and the act of mapping went hand in hand with other tools of the imperial trade such as naming, fencing, road building, and the siting of settlements. In turn maps became one of the discursive practices by which settlers were able to imagine the new-found space they were occupying.

Photography in colonial Australia was also initially valued for much the same reason. Although the camera had been unavailable to the earliest explorers and settlers, it eventually became an ally in the acquisition of new places. Particularly after the introduction of dry-plate photography in the 1880s, the camera became a versatile and portable instrument of appropriation. It was employed in the service of land proud settlers as a geographic *aide-memoire*, and as an adjunct to cartography in fixing images of the acquired land.

Maps and photographs have both, however, been subjected to a re-evaluation of their value as objective or documentary records. Recent scholarship has emphasised the extent to which maps, rather than being the product of the objective and scientific eye, are inevitably burdened by subjective interventions. Simon Ryan has argued that maps are a form of cultural production, and therefore marked by the political and ideological distortion which that term implies. Ryan concluded that 'Maps do not bear any simple relationship to a pre-existent reality, nor is this reality available in any unmediated way' (102).

The photograph has undergone a similar reappraisal. Whereas photography was initially prized for its capacity to produce an accurate and objective record, it is now understood that the photograph is also a culturally determined artefact. Photographs are selected, posed, and framed in a manner which inevitably produces a loaded account of their subject. Even leaving aside the potential for deliberate distortion of the photographic record, we have moved over the course of a century to understand that although the camera may never lie, there is a sense in which a photograph always lies.

There is, however, an important distinction to be made between maps and photographs, and the way in which they represent space. That is, as a representation of a particular space, the map will always privilege place over time. It is in the nature of the map - given the uses that will be made of it, to record what is generalisable about a place, rather than what is specific about that place at a point in time. A map is primarily a geographic, rather than a temporal, device.

This is particularly true of the earliest maps of Australia, for it was peculiarly a land that existed outside of the normal framework of time. Narratives of discovery frequently depended for their impact on the erasure of the past. As Thomas Mitchell rhapsodised on discovering Australia Felix, '...this highly interesting region lay before me with all its features new and untouched as they fell from the hand of the Creator! Of this Eden it seemed that I was the only Adam...' (II, 170)

Alternatively, Australia was also represented as a place without a future. As John Oxley opined when confronted with the landscape just beyond Bathurst, there is 'very little probability' that these 'desolate plains (will) be ever again visited by civilized man' (360). Australia was a space where mapmakers could declare that past time and future time simply did not exist.

Unlike the maps created by Mitchell, Oxley and others like them, however, it is in the nature of a photograph to record not only a point in space, but also a point in time. A photograph allows a form of vicarious exploration by giving the viewer access to a mediated representation of a spatial *and* a temporal moment. Neither is without distortion. In a photograph three dimensional space is flattened and (re)fixed into two dimensions, but similarly the curve of time is flattened and fixed in a way which ruptures our normal understanding of time; that is, our impression that time is incessantly re-forming itself, with what we know as the future manifesting itself as the present, the present becoming instantly the past, and the past becoming ever-increasingly remote.

As James Bradley suggests in *The Deep Field*, this reformatting of space and time isn't an imperfect representation of reality, but rather a new way of seeing and being, one which unexpectedly – and contrary to the map - privileges time over place.

The two-dimensionality of the photograph, the stillness of its surface, these are not inferiorities, they are an integral part of the photograph's nature. It is not a captured space...nor can you reach into it and touch its contents... Rather it is a moment caught forever in stasis: eternal, Platonic, perfect. (x)

As Bradley understands, it is this ability to render time static that is the unique quality of a photograph. The place where a photograph was taken can be revisited, even if it is found to be changed by the passage of time, but the point in time which is (re)constructed in a photograph can never be re-entered, except to the extent that is made accessible by representation in that photograph. A photograph is, in Roland Barthes phrase, the 'natural witness of 'what has been'' (93), and Barthes also describes cameras as 'clocks for seeing' (15). Or as Harry Kitchings, the photographer in Delia Falconer's *The Service of Clouds* claims, taking a photograph was '...like pulling the silver ribbon that tied up the gift of time' (132).

It is this element of the photograph, its capacity to render immutable the moment at which it was taken, that is its attraction for the post-colonial fiction writer. As late colonial and post-colonial Australians expanded their sense of place they inevitably and consciously encountered the history and eventually the pre-history of their land, and they also increasingly perceived it to be a place with a future. In doing so they encountered the land in the context of a new domain, that of time. Whereas the map had served as a powerful tool for negotiating the relationship between space and place, the photograph emerged as a medium for constructing the relationship between space and time. And it may well be that the photograph has supplanted the map as the primary means of knowing and imagining post-colonial space.

### **Gerald Murnane: *The Plains***

Gerald Murnane's *The Plains* is set in a place called Inner Australia, in a period referred to as 'The Second Great Age of Exploration'. The Plains is constituted of broad sun drenched grasslands, and is home to the Plainsmen, a group of wealthy landowners who see themselves as a type apart from the hedonists of Outer Australia. The previous century, which is referred to as the Golden Age of Exploration, was the period in which

maps were drawn to describe what the Plains look like. An understanding of the Plains in this Second Great Age of Exploration must go beyond the making of maps.

The Plainsmen devote their wealth to employing a group of artists whose task it is to interpret the Plains, and to find new ways of understanding and inscribing this vast physical space and the contradictions it seems to embody. These contradictions are manifested in different philosophical positions held by various groups of Plainsmen. These positions revolve around the issue of what the Plains are, or what the Plains mean, or the nature of the relationship between the Plains and those who dwell on them.

One of these artists employed by the Plainsmen is the novel's narrator - an unnamed film-maker, who is engaged to make a film which he believes will expose the true meaning of the Plains. It is to be a film about place, which he believes will demonstrate for the first time that which is unique about the Plains, and by doing so will bring the Plainsmen to a unified understanding of what the film-maker describes as the 'spiritual geography' of the Plains.

At the time of narrating the novel the film-maker has been on the Plains for twenty years. In this time he has shot no film. For two decades he has been cloistered within the library of his patron, shielding himself from the very landscape which is he has been employed to interpret. He has been defeated by a conundrum, the more he contemplates the place referred to as the plains, the more he wonders if they exist at all in the usual physical sense. Eventually he comes to the conclusion that 'the world is something other than a landscape' (104), and that the Plains exist only as a plain in a mathematical sense, and that plain is constituted of time rather than place.

The film-maker is influenced in this by his patron, a man devoted to the study of 'Time', which he describes as 'The Opposite Plain' (88). The patron has a large library which includes many volumes dedicated to the philosophy of Time, and the film-maker believes that his patron has 'become one of those doctrinal solitaires aware of a Time whose true configurations only they perceive' (88).

It is this attribute of Time, that it is entirely personal and cannot be used for the production of a unified vision of space, which overwhelms the film-maker's project. His art is defeated by what he describes as 'the self-defeating proposition that Time can have no agreed meaning for any two people; that nothing can be predicated of it; that all our statements about it are designed to fill up an awesome nullity in our plains and an absence from our memories of the one dimension that would allow us to travel beyond them' (89). That is, we only know the place we occupy from the action of our 'memories', and memory is not a function of place, but of time.

The film-maker's patron it transpires, is also an enthusiastic amateur photographer, and he encourages the film-maker to forsake film and take up photography in order to explore the inscrutable surface of the Plains. The patron tempts the film-maker with the promise of 'an expedition into an unknown world'. The film-maker studies his patron's

photographs and discovers that they have managed to efface the sense of place entirely. He finds that,

... no one was ever posed against any view of pools or stony shallows. Looking at the photographs... I found no recognisable landmarks in their backgrounds. A stranger might have supposed they showed any of a dozen places... (115-116)

The patron's photographs are carefully composed so that their human subjects are always looking away from the photographer, outside the frame of the photograph. To have them engage with the camera would be an acknowledgment of place, a point of view which disclosed a 'here' and a 'there'. What he endeavours to create are representations of an unseen world which he calls 'The Great Darkness', Time. The film-maker reports that his patron,

... cared nothing for the so called art of photography. He was prepared to argue, against those who made pretentious claims for the output from cameras, that the apparent similarities in structure between their ingenious toys and the human eye had led them into absurd error. They supposed that their tinted papers showed something of what a man saw apart from himself - something they called the visible world. But they had never considered where the world must lie. They fondled their scraps of paper and admired the stains and blotches seemingly fixed there. But did they know that all the while the great tide of daylight was ebbing away from all they looked at and pouring through the holes in their faces into a profound darkness. If the visible world was anywhere, it was somewhere in that darkness... (112-113)

With his project in disarray, the film-maker is eventually prevailed upon by his patron to take up a camera, and to search for the essence of the Plains within 'that darkness'. The patron in turn insists upon photographing the film-maker in the act of taking a photograph. But in this carefully composed *tableau vivant*, with which the novel concludes, the film-maker is posed with his camera reversed, with his eye not at the viewfinder but at the lens. He is photographed in the act of photographing his own eye, or indeed what lies behind it. He is about, 'to expose to the film in its dark chamber the darkness that was the only visible sign of whatever I saw beyond myself' (126).

That is, the film-maker is caught in the act of photographing what it is that is entirely personal to him, Time. His project has collapsed in the knowledge that he cannot complete a project based on the unification of space around the common notion of place, because the unique element of Inner Australia is discovered to be Time, the Opposite Plain. This solipsistic and isolated gaze of the explorer of the Second Great Age of Exploration is the antithesis of the empire expanding gaze of the explorers who drew the maps in the Golden Age of Exploration.

If the film-maker's revelation about the nature of his world has a precursor, it may well come in Martin Heidegger's *The Concept of Time*. Heidegger commences by asking what is time, and concludes by rephrasing the question:

What happened to the question? It has transformed itself. What is time? became the question: Who is time? More closely: are we ourselves time? Or closer still: am I my time? (22E)

### **Liam Davison: *Soundings***

Liam Davison's *Soundings* is set in different time periods in the Westernport area of south coastal Victoria. These include the 1820s, a period which encompasses the exploration and settlement of the region; a second later period during which the settlement has grown but still has a somewhat tenuous foothold on the flood prone marshland, and a third period which may be described as the present.

The central character in the present is Jack Cameron. At the novel's opening he is employed as a photographer engaged in taking landscape photographs to assist in mapmaking. We are told that for Cameron, 'there was only the land, always seen through the eye of the lens, always with the aperture set at infinity' (15).

Cameron quits his job and takes a house near the ocean at Westernport. The house is owned by the absent Anton Kleist. Kleist is a collector of antique maps, lithographs and exploration diaries dating from the period of European settlement. Kleist has also gathered photographs in his house encompassing the history of the Westernport. Such is his engagement with the history of the area, that we are told that he 'felt like one of the explorers himself' (28). Alone in Kleist's house, surrounded by representations of the history of Westernport, Cameron begins to discover something about landscape which had escaped him in his role as a cartographic photographer. That is, he begins to discover time, and the changes it has wrought on the area.

Cameron begins to obsessively photograph the local landscapes. In particular he acquires a camera used to photograph the finish of dog races, which operates by being automatically triggered as each dog completes the race. Davison writes that what appealed to Cameron about this device was the way in which, 'the dog was suspended in time. It was this isolation of detail, the close study of a still point and the movement of objects through it which appealed to Jack'. (48)

It is a crude form of time lapse photography, but it enables Cameron to record the changes in the landscape wrought by weather, time of day and changing light. But his real interest is not so much in the changes that take place before his eyes, but in the history that he can't see, in the events and occurrences that preceded his arrival. He senses that the past-time of the bay is available to him, and he comes to believe that he can capture it in his photographs. He is described as being 'like an explorer struggling to understand the land he'd found' (158). Cameron endlessly photographs the bay in the belief that he will be able to freeze moments in its history before the maps were drawn. At first he struggles to capture on film anything beyond the obvious physical space of the bay, although he believes this is a result of his acquired habit of seeing space as place, rather than as time.

On humid days, his photographs caught the illusion... It was then that he thought he was closest to seeing what Hovell had seen, or the French explorers... He thought if he'd taken another shot, changing the angle or getting in closer, or changing the speed of the film, he might have been able to see for an instant beneath the deceptive surface of things to what it was really like. But his own perception always prevailed... He saw what his eyes were conditioned to see and, no matter how hard he searched through the metres of film, there was nothing to show how others had seen it before him. (106)

However, after much perseverance, Cameron does begin to capture on his photographs images of the past. Not clear, unambiguous images, but tantalising and inconclusive glimpses of Westernport's dark colonial era history. He declares that in his photographs,

All time appeared to coexist. Instead of days giving way to nights, and years to years in slow progression as he had always imagined it to be, the past was always there, merging with the present to become the other side of what he saw as some perpetual present, an everlasting now... (183)

By engaging closely enough with his chosen space, Cameron has eventually used his camera to open a gap in time, one which gives him access to the events and history which were responsible for shaping the place which is Westernport.

The focus of Cameron's exploration of Westernport eventually settles on a long dead woman. Inspired by portraits he finds in Kleist's home, he forms an attachment to Anna Black, who drowned many years before in the local mud flats. His photographs become an attempt to retrieve his lost love. As with *The Plains*, the concluding scene in *Soundings* finds the central character with a camera to his eye.

And lifting his camera, he started to focus his lens. He watched as the image of trees grew sharper, the softness falling away from the edges of leaves to reveal something indefinite... Slowly, he drew it towards him ... letting ... his camera do the work. The familiar features – her eyes, her lips, the line of her brow – gradually gained definition, started to fall into shape as though he was dragging her up through water. (216)

Cameron's goal, whether he is trying to understand the landscape or to reach his unknown lover, is to transcend time. He can only achieve this when he has fully surrendered his preoccupation with place he acquired as a photographic cartographer, and learnt to re-conceptualise and photograph space as time.

### **Thea Astley: *Reaching Tin River***

Jack Cameron's infatuation with a person long since dead has a close parallel in Thea Astley's *Reaching Tin River* (1990). The central character, Belle, has become entranced by the deceased Gaden Lockyer, a colonial period empire builder from inland Queensland.

Belle wants to find a way of entering Lockyer's life. She can achieve this in part by following a map to the place where he had once lived. She declares that:

I have drawn a map...

I intend plugging into that map, under landscape, under time, swimming with my researcher's easy freestyle stroke until I surface, gasping, clutching my long-dead beau by the arm (132).

The map guides Belle to the place where Lockyer lived, a derelict homestead, but it does not enable her to transcend time and join her would-be lover. For this Belle has a second device, a photograph. She has brought with her a life-sized poster of Lockyer and his wife standing at the doorway of the homestead. She stretches the poster across the door of Lockyer's home, and she is now ready to burst through its inviting, two-dimensional surface, and enter the time at which he lived.

I concentrate on them, on their oneness, their existence then, willing myself back and backforcing my thoughts towards that centre until everything outside me is diminished...

I lengthen my stride to trot, to sprint, running faster than time until I am hurtling forward up the veranda steps and hurling myself bodily through my paper hosts, making sure it is Mrs Lockyer I obliterate, and I am gaspingly through beyond their startled faces to the other side... (176)

What does Belle encounter on the other side? As might be expected, nothing but the obstinately physical place, where she finds herself not only in the 'here', but very much in the 'now'. She is in,

... an empty room whose walls and floors bear the injuries of absence.

Nothing.

Nothing but a wood sliver in my foot and an overwhelming emptiness... (176-177)

Belle has confronted the limitation, or perhaps the deception of the photograph. She has fallen victim to the photographic illusion of time made accessible, and engaged with the alluring but surreal logic of the suspended moment. As a result she has found herself as isolated and bereft as Murnane's film-maker.

## **Conclusion**

It is not suggested from the example of these three novels that there is a totally consistent meta-narrative being applied by the use of photographic tropes. But each of them does engage with the question of space, and raise questions of how space is constituted. In the considerable literature given to considerations of conceptions of space in Australian and other post-colonial literatures, the emphasis has been decidedly on the side of the transformation of space into place and landscape. In these novels, however, we find an engagement with time as an essential element of space. In the process the cartographic representation of space is subverted in favour of the photographic, and in particular with what Susan Sontag referred to as the photograph's 'irrefutable pathos as a message from times past' (54).

And if we accept that space is produced by discursive practices, then we must question whether the text that is embedded in over 150 years of photographic production, has not

shaped an imagination which is encountering space in terms of time as well as, or perhaps rather than, place.

Australia it seems, may not be the timeless land.

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